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came in cold, and the big crackling fire in the fireplace of the office was a cheerful salutation. Clint Weatherbee, the proprietor, a sandy-mustached mountain of a man,—six feet four in his stockings, as he liked to tell inquirers,—greeted them in an affable roaring voice that seemed to shake the walls.

Mrs. Weatherbee was the cook, and her prowess in the kitchen was notorious. Mr. Starr was placed behind a battery of dishes that represented what Mrs. Weatherbee could do when she tried. There was a plate of oyster patties, of which the patties were so flaky, gauzelike, and ethereal that only the weight of the oysters kept them on the table. There was a fried chicken that had not lived in vain. There were hot biscuits, and in the fluffy interior of each of them a deft hand had placed a little pat of superlative creamery butter. There were other things—but Mr. Starr finally pushed his chair back from the table and held up his hands in self-defense.

"I mustn't die," he said, "till I see Mudge. This hotel is the Delmonico's of Vermont. We'll make it so famous that you'll have to build an addition, Weatherbee. Every automobile that crosses the State line will make a straight course for Boxtton."

Mr. Clint Weatherbee replied with a gratified roar. Mrs. Weatherbee was brought out of the kitchen, confused and reluctant, to receive congratulations. The atmosphere was surcharged with optimism.

Then Mr. Starr sat back and returned to the important matter. He said: "Mudge is our oyster, gentlemen. We must open Mudge."

"You better get an ax," suggested Mr. Weatherbee, fortissimo.

Starr laughed. "We'll see. I'm going to open Mudge before I go to bed tonight. Lead me to him."

TWENTY minutes afterward four men were climbing the stone steps that led to Ezra Mudge's door.

There were two lighted rooms in the house. One of them was on the lower floor. That would be the sitting-room. The other was directly overhead, and Walter Eadbrook's pulse quickened as he looked up and saw, against the lowered curtain, a little fluttering shadow moving to and fro.

Aunt Lyddy Mudge came to the door. The arrival of four men at that time of the day was obviously an amazing and disturbing incident to her. But in her small, pleasant voice she asked them to come in; Mr. Mudge was at home.

If Ezra Mudge was surprised at the visit, his immobile, sharp old face did not reveal the fact. He half rose from his chair, and then settled back with his long fingers clasped over his stomach. Aunt Lyddy turned the lamp-wick up a trifle, and withdrew.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Each of the committee of three was waiting for the others. Finally Joel Tibb took up the burden.

"Mr. Starr, Mr. Mudge," he murmured. "Mr. Starr has just come from the West. I—that is, we—"

"What can I do for you, Mr. Starr?" "You get right down to brass tacks, Mr. Mudge," replied the town booster. "I like that. Here's my card."

Ezra Mudge took the card, squinted at it, and then laid it on the table.

"Hm!" he said. "What's the idea?"

"The idea is," explained Starr, "we're going to boost Boxtton, Mr. Mudge. We're going to make Boxtton bigger, busier, and better. Bigger, busier, better Boxtton! Doesn't that interest you, Mr. Mudge?"

"No," replied Ezra.

"Ah, I see it does," went on the Westerner, as if no reply had been made to his question. "Mr. Mudge, I've come here to put life into a town that ought to do big things—that is going to grow like a weed. I've been looking your beautiful country over this afternoon. I never saw such possibilities, never, upon my word! Water-power, railroad, everything put right here waiting for the spirit to move. A year from to-day you'd never know it for the same place. Where there are five

people, there'll be twenty. Where there are vacant lots in the village, you'll see prosperous buildings. Every man that owns a foot of land or does a dollar's worth of business in Boxtton will grow with it. We're going to boost Boxtton! That's what these gentlemen got me here for. That's our business with you, Mr. Mudge."

"What's your game? What do you get out of it?" asked Ezra, fixing his gray eyes on the stranger with refrigerating intent.

"A businesslike question!" Starr flashed back amiably. "That's business. I like it. I'll give you a businesslike answer. Boosting is my game, Mr. Mudge. Mr. Tibb, here, can tell you what I've done in that line out in my State. I usually work on a fixed salary basis. Sometimes I get a percentage on all new capital invested. I always get what's coming to me, and there's never been a kick yet. But this case is a little out of the ordinary. I'm just breaking into the East. Here's where the big chances are. I'm willing to take this job on a basis of actual expenses, for the reputation I'll get out of it. That's fair, isn't it?"

Starr turned to the committee as he asked the question. They nodded gravely.

"Well," said Ezra, with a show of impatience, "what's it got to do with me?"

"Everything," replied Starr, warming up to the situation. "As I understand it, there's one man that stands to make more money out of the boost than anybody else. That's you. You're a big property-owner. Property values will go 'way up. You've got money to put to work. Business will boom. We'll get new industries, new people, new life. All that means more money in circulation. It means more money for you. That's plain, isn't it? But we can't start on nothing. We've got to have money to work on, for advertising especially. We want every business man in town to put up every cent he can spare for the work. And now," Starr concluded, taking a long sheet of paper from his pocket, "we get right down to brass tacks. You're the man to start the ball rolling. Your name on this paper, against a good round sum, will do the business. Make it real money, Mr. Mudge! Remember, it all comes back with a lot of company. What do you say?"

EZRA MUDGE did not reach for the proffered paper. He merely replied, "I guess not," and pulled his lean body out of the chair. Then he picked up the business card of Mr. Starr and handed it back to that surprised person.

"Much obliged for calling," he added. "Good night."

The three members of the committee rose mechanically, hats in hand. But Starr was undisturbed.

"Wait a minute," he commanded. "Mr. Mudge is going to talk it over with us."

"Oh, no, you needn't wait," countermanded Ezra. "You got my idea, Joel. Good night."

"Wait!" cried Starr, "Mr. Mudge, perhaps I didn't make it plain enough to you what we want to do. Now, let me—"

"You made it plain enough," was the acrid reply. "You want to come into Boxtton and turn everything upside down, and make people bigger fools than they are now. And you want me to pay for it. I guess not. Good night."

The color had come into Starr's face. He raised a hand that trembled.

"I'm not used to this kind of a reception," were his quiet words. "It isn't fair to insinuate that I'm not on the level. I don't know how your manner strikes your own folks, Mr. Mudge, but to a man from my part of the country it seems damned unfriendly, to say the least. But I'm here on business, and feelings don't count. Don't you think we'd better make an appointment?"

"I'm going to bed," said Ezra, suddenly turning down the light until the room was almost dark. "I said 'good night' two or three times, and I call that enough."

"Just a minute, Mr. Mudge, and we'll get out," cried Starr. "I give it up. I won't bother you again. But Boxtton is going to be boosted, and don't you forget that. I see it's going to be a fight be-

tween you and me. All right. Fight it is, Mr. Mudge. My brains against yours. Good night."

The four went silently down the steps, and no word was spoken till they were seated in the carriage. Then Starr laughed and remarked:

"Our friend Weatherbee was right. We needed an ax for that oyster."

Walter Eadbrook was silent. He was looking back up at the dark upper story of the house. He had, by virtue of his association with Starr, fallen under Ezra Mudge's positive dislike.

The booster's hearty voice roused him.

"To-morrow we start the whirlwind campaign," Starr was saying. "We've got to work as we never worked before. We've got the start on that old pessimist up there, because we know now just where he stands. And believe me, gentlemen, we'll show him a few things, if your townspeople have got any nerve at all."

THE impudence of Starr's position, in declaring war on the richest man in Boxtton on the very day of his arrival from an unknown country, was colossal. And it was exactly the prodigiousness, the overwhelmingness of it, that opened the only possible road to success. By ten o'clock several tradesmen had of their own accord gone to the Commercial Hotel and declared themselves in favor of the boosting campaign.

Walter Eadbrook came down to his shoe store half an hour late. He had had a bad night. He was in the worst of humors.

The telephone rang. Eadbrook went over, snatched the receiver from the hook, and shouted impatiently, "Well?"

Then his whole manner changed. "Oh, excuse me," he apologized. "No, I'm not feeling very well. Wants to see me? At once? Of course I'll come right up. I'll start right away."

Eadbrook turned away from the telephone with a dazed expression on his face. Mrs. Mudge had told him that Ezra Mudge wished him to come and see him as soon as possible.

In fifteen minutes Eadbrook was sitting opposite Ezra Mudge, wondering whether the beating of his heart was audible.

"Ye made pretty good time, young man," commented Ezra. "Somebody give you a lift?"

"No; I hoofed it," replied Eadbrook. Ezra stroked his chin beard reflectively before he spoke again. Then he said:

"I knew your father well, Walter. He was an honest man. He was a rarity in Boxtton."

Eadbrook, for lack of any reply, murmured a vague "Thank you." He waited for some reference to the night before; but Ezra seemed to have forgotten it. He stroked his beard some more, and then went on, in a voice from which he eliminated much of its usual harshness:

"What ye got on your mind, Walter?" "About what, Mr. Mudge?"

"The girl said something to her ma, and her ma said something to me," explained the old man, coming to the point.

Eadbrook's tongue seemed to attach itself, at this important moment, to the roof of his mouth. He could not utter a word.

"Ye want to get hitched," continued Ezra, using the good old-fashioned vernacular of Boxtton to describe the ceremony of marriage. "Well, I must say, I was a little bit surprised. I didn't really know you'd been sparking the girl. But it's natural enough, I dare say. I don't know as I've got any objections. Ye picked out a mighty fine girl, young man. As fine a girl as ever walked the earth."

Eadbrook was completely overcome. "Ye seem to have good prospects," went on the old man. "As far as I know, you're a good, upright young man, 'tending strictly to business, and not gallivanting round like most of the young idiots I see downtown. Why didn't ye come to me about it?" he asked suddenly.

"I—was going to," replied Eadbrook. "Of course we don't like to think of her going away, Walter," said Ezra, whose tone had now become amazingly mellow.

"It'll leave two old people alone in the house here. But then, you don't care anything about that, and I don't expect